

## **U.S. Navy Radiocompass Station**

Subsequent to the departure of the U.S. Life-Saving Service in 1915, the U.S. Navy assumed use of the station on the North Spit. In 1922 Peter Loggie of North Bend, Oregon, secured a contract to build a new barracks on the sand dune behind the U.S. Life-Saving Service quarters for use by U.S. Navy personnel (Slattery 1989). A map, "Coos Bay, Oregon, Port of Coos Bay," compiled in 1923 by Major T. F. McGinnis, manager of the Port Dock, showed the "Compass Station, U.S.N." on the North Spit, a four-building facility (McGinnis 1928).

Radiocompass stations were on-shore facilities with equipment for determining the direction of received radio signals. The procedure operated as follows:

Briefly stated, a ship requiring a bearing calls up the radio station or stations from which it is desired to receive a bearing, singly or together, according to the procedure laid down. The station or stations reply directing the ship to transmit her call signal for one minute, on the conclusion of which the station, or stations, will signal the bearings (true) of the ship from that station (Secretary of the Navy 1925:3).

The U.S. Navy had first established a facility approximately four miles up Catching Inlet on the south edge of an area known as Englewood. The station included a bungalow residence for the keeper, a transmitter building, and a radio tower. The facilities were located near the forks of Catching Inlet where the right-hand branch turned toward Libby and the Newport Coal Mine. The facility experienced transmission difficulties because of the intervening hills. The vacant North Spit station proved ideal for the U. S. Navy need. Station 104, Empire, Oregon, had call letters "NPF" and operated with a wave length of 800 kilohertz. In 1925 the Navy maintained six stations in

California, four in Washington, and Fort Stevens and Empire in Oregon (Secretary of the Navy 1925:14).

In time these facilities were newly designated as "detection finding" or "D.F." stations. For many years the North Spit site on Coos Bay was known locally as the "D.F." station. The facilities were annually enumerated by the U.S. Navy for the service of mariners around the world. In 1943 the Empire, Oregon, station was No. 1126, yet having the call name "NPF." The station at Point St. George, California, was nearest to the south and that at Fort Stevens, Oregon, nearest to the north (Secretary of the Navy 1943:24).

During World War II this station had a minimum of six men on duty: a radioman in charge (and his wife) who lived in the officers' barracks, a cook, and four men who stood the watches and resided in the barracks. By 1945 the station reached its maximum staffing with twenty-six men on duty. The assignments included shore patrol on the North Spit from the north jetty to Tenmile Creek, reconnaissance of maritime traffic in the ocean from a lookout erected in a thicket of trees west of the station, and staffing the radiocompass facility. Jack Slattery went on duty at the site on August 1, 1944, and served through September, 1945. Slattery recalled: "There was not enough work for that many to do, but the winding down of the war made the military put them somewhere" (Slattery 1989).

The U.S. Navy kept the North Spit facility "shipshape." The station had an immaculate landscape with lawns, beds of ivy, and plantings of flowers. The crews burned some garbage on the site and hauled other materials by boat to Empire. A YP-93 vessel, operated by Bob Bernhart from a supply depot in Empire, supplied the station. Primary imports were food and fifty-gallon drums of diesel fuel to power the facility generators. Late in 1944 the U.S. Navy constructed a concrete building in the middle of the North Spit south of the D.F. Station for its High Frequency Detection Finding Station. The

HFDF Station had a resident crew and operated at 2.5 kilohertz. Additionally the Navy constructed munitions storage facilities on the North Spit. The primary building was a dome-shaped structure covered with sand. Its massive, metal doors faced east and opened on a small loading dock on the bay on the east side of the spit. The munitions area was "off-limits" to the personnel of the DF and HFDF stations (Slattery 1989).

By 1947 the U.S. Navy had closed the facility on the North Spit. The responsibilities were moved to the Cape Arago Lighthouse where a station, operating on 304 kilocycles, sent out a beam with a twenty-mile broadcast radius (U.S. Navy 1947:67). About 1950 when the North Spit facility used by the U.S. Life-Saving Service and the U.S. Navy was declared surplus, the Coos Bay BLM District disposed of the land as "surplus." Ed Altoffer purchased the land and buildings for \$10,000 or \$12,000 and took possession. For many years Altoffer lived at the site, traveling back and forth across the bay by boat. Eventually he left the location. In 1989 a resurvey by the BLM established that none of the buildings were on the land sold to Altoffer. Thus the Coos Bay BLM District reacquired the site.

Because of the possible eligibility of the buildings standing at this site for entry on the National Register of Historic Places, the Coos Bay BLM District secured the services of Stephen Dow Beckham to identify the structures. The State Historic Preservation Office had taken the position that if the BLM were to proceed with demolition, it would have to hire an architect to provide measured drawings of the buildings in spite of their deteriorated and vandalized condition. While on a research trip to Washington, DC., in March, 1991, Beckham learned that the National Archives had acquired in December, 1990, the records of the Bureau of Docks and Yards (RG 96). These had been trucked in forty-foot long trailers from the U.S. Navy Yard at

Anacostia to the warehouse at Pickett Street in Arlington, VA. (Beckham 1991).

The records were not accessioned and stacked fourteen feet high and nearly 180 feet long--a massive pile of rolls and rolls of blueprints and measured drawings of U.S. facilities from around the world. No external researcher had ever consulted these records and the staff of the National Archives and Records Service estimated that it would be years before finding guides were developed. Few if any of the rolls of records had identifying labels on their outside wrappers. Professor Beckham thought for a half hour and then posed another question: "For matters of security did the Bureau of Docks and Yards make a microfilm of these records?" The answer was "yes." The downside was that the 1,300 rolls of microfilm, also trucked to the Pickett Street warehouse, had no identifications on the boxes. They had been filmed in the concern about the advent of World War II and were presumably never used (Beckham 1991).

Beckham found that Roll No. 1 was in Maine and that Roll 1300+ was of facilities in the Philippines. By bracketing the rolls, he found the organizational scheme was geographical and within a couple of hours had found the pages and pages of measured drawings of the facilities on the North Spit of Coos Bay. Securing a copy of the microfilm and making paper copies met the expectations of the State Historic Preservation Office for measured drawings and permitted the BLM to proceed with removing of underground fuel tanks and demolition of the deteriorated buildings.